

# *Analyzing the Irreplaceable Characteristic of Chinese Characters: A Case Study of Phonetic Chinese Alphabet*

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**Abstract.** As the only official writing system that have been popularizing in China, Chinese characters has an impregnable position. Some researchers in movements for re-forming Chinese characters in history, however, had contested Chinese characters and tried to popularize various phonetic Chinese alphabet schemes to illiterate people in the public. This research using the argument between Chinese characters and Phonetic Chinese alphabet and the limitations of phonetic Chinese alphabet during the period of the phonetic alphabet campaign as an example to demonstrate the irreplaceable and valuable of Chinese characters. Ultimately, this research can demonstrate that whenever in cultural transmission aspect or that of practical apply the current form of Chinese characters cannot be re-placed. However, as phonetic Chinese alphabet has limitations so it can only be a supporting tool to learn Chinese characters and Chinese language (including dialects of Chinese). This research can deepen the understanding of Chinese characters and phonetic Chinese alphabet, and demonstrate the unique value of Chinese characters and Chinese culture and history.

**Keywords:** Phonetic Chinese Alphabet, Limitations, Chinese Character

## **1. Introduction**

Chinese characters has the history of over 3000 years, which has been used from ancient times till now. Chinese character is a sign to record Chinese language, it can be defined as a single character or the whole system of the Chinese character to record Chinese language [1]. Phonetic Chinese character was originated in phonetic alphabet campaign. phonetic alphabet campaign was launched by some re-searchers whose aim was to enhance the cognitive abilities of people and promoting education popularization during the late Qing and early Republican period [2]. Phonetic Chinese character is the unified designation of all the simplified character schemes of the Chinese language. Cangjie was the historian of the Yellow Emperor, he observed the distinct tracks left by birds and beasts and realized that their patterns could be differentiated. Since then he began to create written characters [3]. Chinese character has unique value in various aspects including history, culture, way of expression and aesthetics. However, in the history including the phonetic alphabet campaign some researchers think Chinese characters are too difficult to learn, what is more some other researchers oppose the point of view that Chinese character is practical in current time so they wanted to create another character scheme to replace Chinese character. During the phonetic alphabet campaign some researchers try to promote various phonetic Chinese alphabet scheme to the

public as some more convenient and easy character which can be written in a faster speed. There are many successful writing system reforms in the history but they are mainly simplified the figure of Chinese characters, the form of Chinese characters has never been changed. Being a challenge to the whole Chinese character system Phonetic Chinese alphabet is always a topic that is worth exploring.

In the long history the research about Chinese character and phonetic Chinese alphabet is relatively rich. There are some authority research concerning Chinese character including Shuowen jiezi by Xu Shen, Annotations on Shuowen Jiezi by Duan Yucai, Chinese philology by Tang Lan , Lecture on Chinese character con-figuration and The meaning of studying character Families in ‘Shuowen’ by Wang Ning, Research of Chinese folk variant characters by Zhang Yongquan, A brief discussion on Orthography by Wang li. Liu Xiaoming, Wang Dongjie and Wang Bing has more research about phonetic Chinese alphabet than other researchers and the research of Wang Dongjie are more authoritative. But the research about using phonetic Chinese alphabet to discuss how Chinese characters are irreplaceable is still has some gaps. In CNKI, there are only 74 article using phonetic Chinese alphabet as title while there are only 199 of that of “the value of Chinese character”. Researcher seldom make a deeper research about the value of Chinese character reflected in the phonetic alphabet campaign.

This research will use documentary research method, interdisciplinary research method, case analysis method to analysis the unique value of Chinese character. This article will comparatively analyze the features of Chinese characters and phonetic Chinese alphabet to prove the limitations of phonetic Chinese alphabet. The phonetic alphabet campaign is meaningful about the research of the value of Chinese characters and the future development of the reform of Chinese character. This article can not only enhance the culture confidence of Chinese people but also inspire the script studies of other countries.

## **2. The evolution of Chinese character**

Chinese character evolved from pictographic symbol. That developed into hieroglyphics, indicative characters, ideogrammic compounds, mutually explanatory characters, loaned characters, phono-semantic compounds these are the six scripts. Before qin dynasty China use classical Chinese character after it evolve into modern Chinese character [4]. Form and pronunciation of modern Chinese character and ancient Chinese character both has been developed, like sementic expansion, semantic shift, graphic evolution, new character, phonetic loan characters, variant forms, phonetic changes but the form of Chinese character has never been changed [4]. A relative authority viewpoint is that Chinese character has a history for near 4000 years [1]. Chinese character has been through vernacularization and simplification but its form has never changed, this comes from its stability. The form of Chinese characters can remain stable whenever how it has changed, also that has a mutual influence with Chinese language. The phonetic Chinese alphabet, however, its character form will be changed with the change of the pronunciation of Chinese language as it is a phonetic writing system. Chinese character has never been replaced in times of writing system reforms, this can continuously prove the unique value of it and feature of irreplaceable.

## **3. The stability of the form of Chinese character**

### **3.1. Cultural perspective**

Chinese character cultural sphere can show the value of Chinese characters and dramatically improve the stability of Chinese characters. Chinese character cultural sphere, like its name, is a

cultural community using Chinese character as bond. Its historical origin is the general term of regional perspectives that contract its basic community with Confucian cultural, so it can also be named as Confucian cultural sphere [5]. For millennia, Confucian has made immense contribution for the stability of Chinese character in the perspective of policy and culture. Chinese character not only benefit China but also spread abroad and have been used by the Chinese cultural sphere till now. Cultural value is the fundamental reason to explain why it can be spread abroad.

### **3.2. Political perspective**

For millennia, the politics of China is unified. Chinese civilization is continuing till now and has never been broken. Political and cultural unification strengthen the stability of Chinese character. Being an educational system, the Imperial examination system improve the education of Chinese character, besides as candidate has to use classic Chinese character to write during the text the position of Chinese character had been secured.

### **3.3. Perspective of the feature of Chinese character**

The ideographic nature of Chinese characters and its stability help it continue till now. “Chinese character can use the same form, under the foundation of recording the same meaning, to keep its express ability from ancient time till now... Modern people can avoid being influenced of phonetic variation from Chinese characters and understand the meaning of ancient people” [6]. The phonetic variation in the history generally has not influenced the written communication of Chinese character. Analyzing from synchronic perspective, the ideographic and pictographic nature can make it widely adopt in China which has various dialects. Also these natures make Chinese character to be an essential part of the character of other countries of Chinese character sphere. This also prove the use of Chinese character about the centripetal force of Chinese culture [7]. Analyzing from diachronic perspective the ideographic and pictographic nature help it avoid been influenced by phonetic variation. In the long history of China, the pronunciation of Chinese character has an immense evolution but that of meaning has slightly changed. That is one point to explain the continuous existence of Chinese culture.

## **4. The limitations of phonetic Chinese alphabet**

Although so much effort was paid during the time of the phonetic alphabet campaign, phonetic Chinese alphabet was eliminated gradually.

### **4.1. Mechanical and uncoordinated of phonetic Chinese alphabet scheme**

Making Cai Xiyong’s Chuanyin Kuaizi as an example. According to it the rule of using phonetic Chinese alphabet is easy to learn, but consider of the mechanical and abstract of its rule this article has questioned about the persistence of memory to this rule. Indeed, if consider from the perspective of the general public who are mostly illiterate, they can handle some simple spoken words by only a little rule from that scheme. But this memory of that rule can last for a long time because that is mechanical and abstract. They have to review it for times and if they have not used it for a longer time they may completely forget it and need to learn it again. Also, the shape of these characters is resemble, although it only need some simple strokes to write a paragraph, but it is hard to understand the meaning of the character quickly because it need to be read character by character. What is more, as readers need to combine context to distinguish homophone, that made the reading

process harder and slower. In contrast, the form of Chinese character is more figurative and highly recognizable. The reading speed of it is higher than that of the phonetic Chinese alphabet. Also, because the idographic nature of Chinese characters is higher, the persistence of the memory of the meaning is long-er. The rule of this scheme is convenient but the realistic apply of that is not, which means it cannot be practical in usual life [8]. Another point is that some phonetic Chinese alphabet scheme including Chuanyin Kuaizi try to combine the feature of Chinese character and phonetic alphabet in form, while idographic system and phonetic system cannot be blended [9].

The phonetic Chinese alphabet scheme cannot be unified, the fundamental reason is that they lack the support from government [10]. At that time government has not popularized the official language. General public only use dialects to communicate but has not handle official language. So the official language version of phonetic Chinese alphabet cannot be widely used in country. Being a phonetic system, strong support from the government is needed to popularize and promote it for a long period. Otherwise it cannot be a scientific writing system. Phonetic Chinese alphabet is harder to be popularized after the government start to implement the policy of basic literacy school. Considering of the situation that Chinese Classic texts has not be translate into phonetic Chinese alphabet, the ability to handle some commonly used Chinese characters is more practical.

## 4.2. The limitation of reading comprehension

Limitation of pronunciation. “Phonetic alphabet can only faithfully record the current language but cannot record ancient language, so the written language of phonetic alphabet is still a language to serve speech” [11]. Phonetic Chinese alphabet can record the pronunciation of the Chinese language but the pronunciation of phonetic Chinese characters will also change, so it can only be popularized in the cultural communication of a period of time. After that, the former one will become extinct scripts. More importantly this phenomenon will influence people’s understanding of text, that made people really hard to preserve the culture from the former phonetic Chinese alphabet [11]. What is more, based on the phonetic nature of it and the situation that China has mountains of dialects, dialects limit general public to read the article that is written in another dialect version of phonetic Chinese alphabet. This limits the range of books to read and restrict the cultural communication between different dialect area. To popularize the official language version of phonetic Chinese alphabet the government should popularize official language first. This method, however, will restrict the use of dialects because people need to write and read in official language. This phenomenon will threaten millennia-old cultural traditions of these dialect areas, while these areas all make up China. In contrast, Chinese characters will not be influence by dialects and be popularized nationwide without any cultural sacrifice.

Limitation of Reading Literature Languages. To make general public use phonetic Chinese characters to read classical texts, the government should translate these articles which are written from ancient time to the present into phonetic Chinese alphabet. The cost of it is too much. Also, how to translate them is still a problem. Making latinized phonetic Chinese alphabet as an example. “cang hai yue ming zhu you lei, Lan tian ri nuan yu sheng yan” is the latinized phonetic Chinese alphabet of an ancient Chinese poem the meaning of which is “Under the moon over the sea, pearls bear tears; At sun-warmed Lantian, jade engenders smoke”. These are ancient written language of Chinese while that is totally different from the modern spoken language of Chinese. This form of text influences the beauty of an ancient poem and is also really hard to understand through speech. Another example is a sentence written in modern Chinese “xiang qian kan bu yao xiang qian kan”. The meaning of it is “Look forward, but not just at money”. The first “xiang qian kan” means look forward while the deeper meaning of that is reach for a bigger goal. The second “xiang gain kan”

means look at money and the deeper meaning of it is only to care about money or any other profit. This form of phonetic Chinese character not only loses the linguistic embellishment of Chinese literature, but also harder to be understand. In the written language of Chinese this phenomenon is numerous, while only Chinese character can express these mean clearly. The application of phonetic Chinese alphabet will sacrifice the literary devices that are specialized in Chinese characters.

According to Chuanyin Kuaizi phonetic Chinese alphabet can help general public available to read classic texts. “If we further translate classical texts into common expression. Through popularizing this kind of text, the text will be changed from simple, unadorned and concise to classical and rich. What was once comprehensible only to scholars can also available to farmer, craftsman and businessman. This can benefit the cultural and educational popularity, which is definitely not pointless” [12]. The literature feature of ancient classical texts, including ancient poems has is unique beauty. It is really hard to be translate without influence its meaning and euphony which including rhyme. Common language cannot completely show the cultural value of classical texts, if this are popularized the research of classical texts will be fewer and fewer. Through a long time, the effect of cultural preservation will be worse. What is more, the policy and economic situation of that time cannot popularize any education to general public. So even though using the phonetic Chinese alphabet, the problem cannot be solved. As Liu Xiaoming and Liu Wei said, this theory was just a stopgap measure that only addresses the symptoms and cannot solve the root problem [13].

From this perspective, “the unity of speech and writing” which is a goal that researchers that trying to made during the period of the phonetic alphabet campaign is pointless as they only achieve it by making the written text into spoken text. While for the written text the unity of speech cannot be achieved. This is decided by the nature of Chinese character and Chinese language. As previously stated, the form of Chinese characters is stable while the pronunciation of that changed faster, this can be one of the reason to explain the gap between the writ-ten language and spoken language of Chinese. In conclusion neither Chinese character and phonetic Chinese alphabet can achieve the unity of speech and writing. The difference between modern literary text and modern spoken language can also explain this point. Surveying the research of any subject, the academic research cannot make progress if researchers only research about shallow knowledge. The knowledge that is hard to learn is the key to redefine current understanding of researcher and expand their intellectual horizons. That viewpoint also fit the learning of text. Simple writing system scheme can only be used to write simple texts. The implement of the unity of speech and writing means abandoning difficult and complex articles to easily understand every articles. If that has been carried out, the general public who use phonetic Chinese alphabet will lose the chance to learn the cultural canon of China from millennia of history. As Confucius said “words without grace will not go far”. The writing system which can only record spoken language but not writing language cannot be a persistent tool for cultural communication and preservation. That will ultimately be forgot-ten in the advancement of time.

### 4.3. Education and cultural preservation

As noted above although phonetic Chinese alphabet is easy to learn, this writing system cannot popularize education. The key is that under the national situation of that time, any teaching method of any writing system scheme cannot be popularized and benefit general public. The basic literacy school that government strongly implemented has not made achievement that of phonetic Chinese characters in definitely harder which has only a few supporters. This movement is restricted by policy and cost. What is more, as the phonetic Chinese alphabet is only for general public and that is



a writing system scheme mainly for spoken language, that has not replaced Chinese character which can be called “Characters for elite”. So, that scheme is adverse for the people in the general public who wants to achieve social class mobility. While the “dual-track” education that was proposed in the period of the phonetic alphabet campaign will made the education more complex. The promotion of phonetic Chinese alphabet will separate the text that is written by “elite” and other people, also the way of reading of them [9]. People need to use Chinese characters to record and preserve Chinese culture. That is because Chinese character can express richer thought and emotion, which is highly malleable. If Chinese character only popularize between “elite”, the goal to develop the intelligence of general public cannot be achieved. Also, they will not have the ability to take the responsibility to preserve Chinese culture. This research believes that most of the general public are illiterate is because they were restricted by economic condition, politic position and notion. Although it is hard to make the general public handle the meaning of classic texts but the learning of Chinese characters can be started from common ones and after that they can learn further through their own effort. By this effort some people in the general public can achieve social mobility and live a better life [14].

## 5. Conclusion

The protection from the government and the cultural and historical value of Chinese character has decided that is irreplaceable. Using phonetic Chinese character as a writing system is not a better way to develop the intelligent of general public. So whenever how much the general public can handle, Chinese characters should be the only writing system for Chinese language. As during the period of the phonetic alphabet campaign that series of phonetic Chinese alphabet scheme has not realize popularization, the research of the using effect of that is not complete. However, this research can define that being the predecessor of the current The Hanyu Pinyin scheme, phonetic Chinese alphabet has pioneering value. This research field should compare the usage effect from different dialect areas of different scheme to study more limitation and contemporary value of phonetic Chinese alphabet. because of its historical limitation The phonetic Chinese alphabet campaign cannot be popularized but its enlightening significance is the pursue of universal education and better writing system, which provide abundant examples and experiences for field of philology. This article suggests that the research about the future development of Chinese writing system should focus on simplified Chinese characters instead of any phonetic Chinese alphabet scheme.

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